

# The “People’s Movement Left” and Rammanohar Lohia: an evaluation at a time of crisis

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Simplifying matters somewhat at the present juncture three significant streams of Left political practice can be identified in India: first, the Communist Parliamentary Left or what Dipankar Basu has termed the Social Democratic Left (SDL), which includes the CPM, CPI and their allies, second what may be termed the Communist non-Parliamentary Left (CnPL) which includes CPI (Maoist), CPI (ML) and smaller Maoist Parties and third, the People’s Movement Left (PML), sometimes called the “non-Party Left,” which is also largely non-Parliamentary (though for reasons different from the Maoist Left). PML includes various organizations belonging to the National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM) and other related movements (such as the anti- caste movement, the new farmers’ movements).

This essay argues that the socialist tradition that lies behind the PML has much to offer to overcome the shortcomings of the Marxist Left.

The SDL faces multiple crises at this juncture, some of which have been extensively analyzed following its electoral defeat. Whatever may be its failings on the leadership and organizational fronts (and those are many), it is clear that there is a profound crisis of thought also. The SDL suffers from excessive attachment to a Eurocentric and stagist theory of history (wherein industrial capitalism is a necessary step to socialism) and an economic determinist philosophy (which gives short shrift to non-economic forms of oppression and expression). In addition its theory does not allow significant revolutionary agency to peasants and informal sector workers who constitute the overwhelming majority of the working population of India. The demise of the Soviet Union has added to the bankruptcy of thought and the feeling of “TINA.”

The CnPL is also unable to break completely from a Eurocentric form of Marxism and a stagist theory of history, albeit due to its Maoist moorings it is sensitive to an ex-colonial reality not only in practice but also at the level of theory, and recognizes the central role of the peasantry in revolutionary transformation of society. Despite significant experiments in direct democracy as well as economic development in Maoist controlled territories, its strategy of armed struggle and its boycott of parliamentary politics has precipitated a crisis of its own as the State retaliates in a violent manner, and the working population is caught between the two. The ensuing cycle of violence has claimed many lives and within current

praxis there does not seem to be an end to it. Furthermore, arguably the abdication of the Chinese leadership to a particularly vicious form of industrial capitalism may have contributed to a muddying of the CnPL's vision for a future Indian society.

The PML has risen to prominence in the 1980s and 90s, as the Soviet and Chinese experiments were running their course. It is thus less burdened with their failures. It is also more rooted theoretically in the Indian political tradition, drawing more inspiration from Gandhi rather than from Marx. It has largely relied on non-violent methods of resistance and some of its ideologues speak of "alternative models of development" in a manner reminiscent of Gandhi's critique of development. However it seems to lack theoretical coherence since it takes the form of myriad local struggles over jal, jungle aur zameen (water, forest and land). The degree to which a given local movement challenges the established order also varies greatly across the country. Hence it is difficult to ascertain the revolutionary potential of the sum of such movements. Notwithstanding this it has received widespread support from Left intellectuals, academic ones in particular, perhaps because it is unburdened with failures of "actually-existing Socialisms" of the 20th century.

The theoretical backbones of the SDL and the CnPL are well-known. The writings of Marx, Lenin and Mao stand tall in this regard. The theoretical basis of the PML is less clear but in fact has a long and distinguished career in India. This is a type of Socialism that takes not only Marx but also Gandhi seriously and attempts to construct both a political practice and a vision for a future society different from orthodox Marxism. In this article I will use Rammanohar Lohia's writings as an example of this tradition.

Lohia is an unjustly neglected figure in the Indian political tradition. To the extent that people are familiar with him, they either know him as Gandhi's disciple or perhaps as Nehru's critic in the 1960s and if they are familiar with some socialist history, as Jayaprakash Narayan's co-worker in the Socialist wing of the Congress and later a leader of the Socialist Party. In fact Lohia was a highly original thinker who had something interesting to say on questions as diverse as mode of industrialization, possibilities for an India-Pakistan Federation and the "national language" question in India. He is also someone whose world-view is most in harmony with the PML. Below I highlight some crucial aspects of Lohia's thought that are helpful to us in charting a way forward.

Lohia is an atheist and a materialist who takes Gandhi's critique of modernity seriously. He believes, as Gandhi did, that the promises of modernity are only for making and not for fulfilling. Gandhian ideas of non-violence and inseparability of means and ends also influence Lohia's thinking. Yet, from his early years in Germany, Lohia is also deeply influenced by European socialist traditions in which Marx looms large. From Marx Lohia takes materialism and class, but rejects his theory of history and progress. If Ram Guha's assertion that "inside every thinking Indian is a Gandhian and a Marxist struggling for supremacy" is correct, in Lohia the two are hybridized in a fecund manner. However, characteristically Lohia himself rejects any suggestion that he tries to combine Marx and

Gandhi and says: “Socialism does not need to claim either that it is Marxist or Gandhian, nor that it is anti-Marxist or anti-Gandhian.” In Lohia’s hands Gandhian theory and practice acquired a far more radical edge. Distinguishing himself from the “official Gandhism” of the day (and people like Vinoba Bhave) Lohia jokingly referred to himself as a “kujaat Gandhivaadi” (low-caste Gandhian).

Another significance of Lohia’s elaboration of Gandhi’s ideas is that he is far more well-acquainted with the European socialist traditions than Gandhi ever was and as a result may be more approachable to those who are unwilling to take Gandhi seriously only because he was unacquainted with Marx

### **Eurocentrism:**

Arguably most Indian political thinkers with some mass following have thought within European modernist paradigms, ways of thinking about society that reached their culmination in 19th century Europe. This includes “indigenist” (“swadeshi”) thinkers on the Right who do so unwittingly. Prominent exceptions are Gandhi and later Lohia. Of the modernist paradigms, Liberalism and Marxism in particular have profoundly influenced Indian thinkers. Marxist thinkers, despite their radical aspirations, have been mostly unable or unwilling to shake of the modernism of Marx, which in keeping with its time viewed the world from the point of view of Europe, and measured progress as a process of Europeanization of the non-European world. The advent of postmodernism in the Euro-American and later the Global Academy has served either to seduce some Marxists to postmodernism or to harden Modernist positions among others. It is not clear yet if postmodern Marxists can create a different socialist vision for the 21st century.

In his books “The Wheel of History,” and “Marx, Gandhi and Socialism” (of particular interest is an essay titled “Economics After Marx”) Lohia challenges the Eurocentrism of orthodox Marxist accounts of History. He notes that the vast majority of humanity has only a secondary place in a narrative centered largely on the “Rise of Europe.” Further he challenges a narrative of progress which only recognizes the adoption of industrialism in either its capitalist or (then) communist forms by the colonies as progress. Struggling to keep history open-ended and the fate of post-colonial societies in their own hands Lohia notes: “Capitalism and Communism are two completely elaborated systems and the whole world is in their grip. The result is poverty, war and fear. A third way of thinking is also making its presence felt on the world stage. It is still insufficient and has not been completely elaborated, but it is open-ended. An open system retains the possibility of truth and progress, while in a closed system facts are treated violently, declared meaningless and cast aside.”

### **Mode of Development:**

Along with the question of Eurocentrism, the question of the type of economic development was Lohia's most fundamental theoretical challenge to Marxism. Marxists have been by and large unwilling to confront the possibility that industrialism and not capitalism may be the primary impediment to achieving the good life everywhere on the planet. Dazzled by the spectacle of modern science and technology and seduced by promises of plenty, Marx and later Marxists gave short shrift to two of their own fundamental insights: that history matters and that technology is both a cause and effect of the social relations of production. Assuming that the evils in industrialism (which have never been particularly hidden in its two centuries of existence) would disappear under socialism amounted to forgetting the peculiar historical conditions under which industrialism took shape in Europe and America and overlooking that fact that modern technology is profoundly shaped by capitalist social relations (early Soviet experiments with Taylorism in an effort to increase productivity are a case in point).

Thinkers in the Lohia tradition have long emphasized that the availability of colonies was crucial to Europe's industrial development and that the non-availability of such colonies for India means a process of internal colonization in the manner that we have seen ample evidence of since 1947. Thus crucially, history has borne out the Gandhian-Lohiaite position on this issue. Marxists and other modernists still find this difficult to accept wholly since it calls into question the very possibility that industrial capitalism in the European manner could take shape in the colonies. And if it cannot, what prospects then for socialism?

Kishan Patnaik, another unjustly neglected figure in the Indian Socialist tradition notes that Lohia returns time and again to the question of technology. In his essay "Gandhi, Lohia and Modern Civilization," Patnaik quotes Lohia:

"That scientific progress will bring forth an age of plenty is a pitiable thought, one that forsakes intellect. We must consciously build a political and economic structure that bridges the gap between and within nations. Current industrial technology cannot do this- that it can do this is extremely doubtful. This technology originates in very specific circumstances: one low population and abundant land; two, a certain given amount of capital available per capita and developed machinery; three, Western Europe producing industrial goods for the whole world." (translated from Hindi)

Further Patnaik notes that "In Independent India's politics Lohia is the only leader whose agenda included the 'obstinate' insistence on challenging Nehru's policy of Westernizing the Indian economy and society as well as organizing the masses to resist it."

Lohia is able to avoid the "productivity-fetishism" of Marxism because of the influence of Gandhi. Yet by forcefully bringing up the question of class, private property and economic equality, as well as by adopting a stance that is not anti-technology, but rather anti-industrialism, he is better able to deal with allegations that he is merely glorifying poverty. This also means that a "small is beautiful" approach to technology is not taken to be a panacea for the problem of development.

## **Economic Determinism:**

Lohia explicitly rejects economic or class reductionism and accords equal importance to caste and gender oppression. Caste as well as class are center-pieces of his theory of history. And his idea of the “seven revolutions” (sapt-kranti) anticipates “race, class and gender” analyses that are popular today. The seven revolutions are for: gender equality, end to racial inequality, end of caste inequality, end to imperialism and creation of a world government, end to economic inequality based on private property, end to use of arms and institution of the principle of civil disobedience and opposition to encroachments upon individual freedom.

The followers of Lohia have thus found it far easier than Marxists to take caste struggle on its own terms and to recognize that the question of caste cannot be reduced to the question of class.

## **State:**

Lohia also anticipates contemporary notions of decentralized governance although he tempers Gandhi’s anarchist tendencies with a sort of “functional federalism.” His concept of the “four-pillar state” (chaukhamba raj) is a pragmatic attempt to combine Gandhian village democracy with a modern State apparatus, the four pillars being: village, district, state and center. It is important to remember that Lohia was speaking of a decentralized socialist state at a time with such ideas were not part of Left mainstream thought.

A few words by way of conclusion. The foregoing is not intended as a comprehensive survey of Lohia’s thought or as a complete critique of the SDL and CnPL from the Lohiaite perspective. Nor is it meant to be a mud-slinging exercise against Marxists. Rather it is a modest effort to acquaint those who may not be so acquainted with attempts to “Indianize Marx” as it were. Marx has encountered Gandhi in a very productive way over the past hundred years in India. While Communists of various persuasions have not taken Gandhi particularly seriously, the Socialists have done so. This is not an arm-chair intellectual tradition but rather a political one. From Jayaprakash Narayan and Lohia to Shankar Guha Neogi those who have contributed to it have been in the thick of politics. As such it may suffer from theoretical inconsistencies and dead-ends. However, it is a heritage which in attempting to build a new Socialism for the 21st century it would behoove us to engage critically with.

## **Further Reading:**

1. Rammanohar Lohia, *Itihaas Chakra* (The Wheel of History) Navahind Prakashan, 1963
2. \_\_\_\_\_, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, Navahind Prakashan, 1963
3. \_\_\_\_\_, *Fundamentals of a World Mind*, Sindhu Publications, Bombay, 1987
4. Kishan Patnaik, *Vikalpheen nahin hai duniya*, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 2000
5. Sunil, *Nandigram and the Blind Faith in Industrialization*, Samayik Varta, June 2007

(original in Hindi, English translation at <https://sanhati.com/excerpted/588/>)

6. Special Issue of Hindi Journal Samayik Varta (March 2003), Lohia in the 21st Century

7. Blogs: <http://samatavadi.wordpress.com> and <http://samajwadi.blogspot.com>

[9 Comments »](#)

## 9 Responses to “The “People’s Movement Left” and Rammanohar Lohia: an evaluation at a time of crisis”

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1. *kg.kannabiran* Says:

[June 20th, 2009 at 01:43](#)

Dear freind I am currently President PUCL. Your analysis is interesting. The bridging of gulf between Ganhi and loia. Lohia is a fine thinker but unfortunately appeare to be community of porcupines and therefore could never come closer to each other. They were incapable of sublimating their egos even for peoples cause. kgk

2. *Samarendra Das* Says:

[June 22nd, 2009 at 07:57](#)

Dear Sathi, Your essay is interesting. Hope you will let me know more about your work. People’s movement’s in present state are not necessarily tilt to left as we witness in India. Many of them are filling the vacuum that are created by the lack of “real Left” forces and now replaced by a mixture of ngos, reactionary forces along with a lot many free floating individuals mostly disilluioned by the present day politics. I agree what thinkers like Kishen Pattnayak saw in the real potential behind the people’s movement. After reading Deepankar’s essay in the EPW on the SDL I think we still need to look at the people’s movements of other countries.

One such example can be the recent events that are unfolding in Peru..

Samarendra

[sdasorisa@rediffmail.com](mailto:sdasorisa@rediffmail.com)

PS: One small correction in your essay Kishan should be spelt as =Kishen

3. *K.Sekhar* Says:

[June 28th, 2009 at 15:31](#)

Lohia more than any other leader in free India resisted hegemony of every kind. He was a great sensitizer as well as mobilizer. Non-conformist to the core he always galvanised the public to fight even the slightest encroachment on their rights. His non-violent methods of resistance and advocacy of representations and social justice need to be emulated. You are right in saying that he has been unjustly neglected in Indian politics.

4. *vijayaraghavan cheliya* Says:

February 9th, 2010 at 12:43

dears

i went through your words. i am also very interested to learn lohias thoughts.

vijayaraghavan cheliya

secretary, lohia vicharavedi

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5. *Anand Kumar* Says:

February 28th, 2010 at 03:44

This is an impressive synoptic view of Dr. Lohia's ideas. You will do justice to your purpose by providing a little more material under the sub-headings of Caste and class; Gender, Caste, Class and socialism, Technology and a socialist civilization, Revolution and Satyagraha way. You have created a good comparative view for a broad spectrum of readers from the Marxists and Maoists to Gandhians. This is Lohia Centenary Year. may I urge you to go further and give us more of your understanding of Lohia ideas and their significance. Here is already a good synopsis for a first rate book on Lohia.

6. *edayathsreedharan* Says:

March 1st, 2010 at 11:13

iam very pathetic that their is no socialaist movement to carry the principles and ideas

7. *ghanashyam sonar* Says:

November 15th, 2011 at 06:54

amit tuze article marathit aahe? mode of production relation article epw madhye pahile ajun opinion dyayache aahe, shyam sonar [shyam.panther@gmail.com](mailto:shyam.panther@gmail.com)

8. *Sunil kumar* Says:

November 7th, 2014 at 03:03

Mujhe Lohia saptkranti& itihās chakra chāyī .Navahind prakshan ka Chautauqua.Kai se milega.

9. *K.p.sharma.* Says:

December 26th, 2017 at 04:11

Please help me to get lohia book on chaukhamha and sapt kranti.

**Leave a comment**

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